

A precious sample of justice

A profile of Il Chul Kang

Il Chul Kang's life, like many Korean people her age, has been marked by traumatic events and forces — war, racism, classism, sexual discrimination. But because she was abducted into military sexual slavery at a young age, she has borne more than her share of the burden forced upon her generation.

Now in the sunset of her life, Kang is receiving a tiny portion of justice through the verdict of the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal, which found the state of Japan guilty for crimes against humanity for the comfort women system. Of course, it is not enough. But it is something.

On the last day of the Tribunal, December 12, after the guilty verdict was read, the former comfort women, and the younger women, sexual violence survivors who testified at a public hearing on recent wars and conflicts, stood on the stage together in an informal ceremony. Kang and several other Korean former comfort women stood in the front line, beautifully attired in pastel hanboks. They raised and lowered their joined hands three times in the traditional salute of "Mansei!" or "May Korea live 10,000 years!" Everyone laughed and cried at once — a great moment.

The conferring of that tiny portion of justice, too little and too late, was obviously still a big event for Kang and the other former comfort women, known respectfully as the *halmonis* (grandmothers).

Korean Quarterly interviewed Kang the day before the ceremony. Despite her ongoing grief, some healed with time, some very fresh, she is a strong person who looks beyond herself. In that respect, she is very much like the other former comfort women in attendance. Time and circumstances have weeded out the rest, who were also remembered that day. They were the ones who didn't get killed, commit suicide, or die of old age, who had the strength to go public with their terrible past and understand the historical importance of their public statement.

Kang spoke specifically about how she intends to warn, to educate and raise awareness in the world about what happened to the comfort women and how that experience reverberated for the rest of their lives. This is her story, the story she said she wants Americans to know, as



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told through translator Kyung Park.

It all started with a few hasty words in Korean. All school children knew Korean was forbidden (during the Japanese occupation of Korea). Families lived a careful bilingual life in those days, using Korean for home and family, and Japanese for school and business. Speaking Korean in public was illegal, and punishable if heard by a Japanese authority.

She and the other kids were all lined up for sports activities, she remembered. Her older sister called her name. She looked over her shoulder, and for some reason, perhaps because it was a family member calling her, she answered in Korean. The teacher, a Japanese man, overheard. His punishment was harsh. He slapped her on the face, and beat her repeatedly, probably as an example to the others.

Kang was the baby of the family, the youngest of 12. Her parents were farmers, and were already old when she was a young teenager. Her older brothers earned the income and were responsible for the household. When they saw their little sister's face, they were outraged. This time, they took their sense of responsibility too far. They went after the teacher, and beat him up, a courageous and foolhardy act. Immediately, the police were after them, and they had to go into hiding. They couldn't go to work. No money came in. Things got difficult. After repeated visits to the house, trying to catch the two brothers, the police finally took her. And her ordeal as a comfort woman began.

She was 15 at that time. She had not even menstruated yet. She knew nothing about sex.



She was taken by train from her hometown in North Kyungsang Province, South Korea. She was given no explanation of where she was being sent. There were many other girls on the train. None knew what was happening. She found out later she had been sent to an army base in the Manchurian border area north of Harbin, near the Mokdang River.

She was sick during the trip and after she got there, she said, but it didn't matter. They left her alone only for the first night. On the second night, seven soldiers came and raped her. A deep anger and grief over her lost innocence began that day.

She developed a fever, but they didn't care. Things went on like that, day after day. She remembers she had some kind of medicine, perhaps an antiseptic, she was required to use to wash herself before each soldier came for his turn to rape her. They lined up outside her room. She received no medical care.

One night, a very high ranking military officer struck her, causing a severe head injury. It became infected. They put packing in it. When they took the packing out, she said, the pus would just pour out of it. She was in terrible pain.

Korean people in the Japanese army also raped her, she said bitterly. They all did it. Some soldiers would burn her with cigarettes, just to inflict pain. At this point, she stretched the neck of her knit top, far enough to show, on her upper neck and right shoulder, white circles of scar tissue. "You are the only people I have showed this," she said. She also has headaches and frequent nosebleeds to this day, caused from the head injury, she said. As she



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became more distressed during the interview, her nose bled, and she held a tissue on it as she talked. Aside from the physical scars, the psychological scars are also severe. When she thinks about the rapes, her whole body trembles with a horror that lives just under the surface.

With the illness, trauma and lack of information, she was unclear about how long she was there. Her sense of time seemed to return after she was rescued. She knows the rescue was one week before Japan's surrender on August 15, 1945. Since she was 15 in 1943, she may have been there as much as two years.

Kang barely escaped with her life. She was so sick that she was either thought to be dead, or close enough to death. Two soldiers, carrying her body out to be burned, were attacked by Korean soldiers and Korean independence fighters, who overcame her captors. The Koreans recognized her as a fellow Korean and took her back to their camp, where she was nursed back to health.

She found out when she was better that the Japanese had already left China, leaving the comfort women behind. She had no way to return. She put off marriage for many years, hoping to return to Korea and be married there.

When she was about 30, she gave up that dream. She married a Korean man who lived near her in Manchuria. They had three children. He passed away about 15 years ago. Today, she realizes her marriage was not the happiest because she missed her home and family so much. Until recent years, one could not call or mail letters to or from China, so she had no information about them.

In 1991, news reached her in China that the former comfort women of Korea had organized through the Korean Council for the Women Drafted into Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (the Korean Council), and, hoping for help, she contacted them. The Korean Council arranged for her to travel and visit, and eventually helped her to prove her citizenship. In March, 2000, it was finalized, and she moved into the House of Sharing (a communal residence for the former comfort women) with nine other residents and Hei-jin *sunim*, the Buddhist monk who cares for all of them.

When she first saw Korea again, she said, even the outlines of the pine trees filled her with joy. She scooped up some dirt from her hometown, and carried it in her purse until she was able to return for good.

But there are no fairytale endings. Kang has a separated family again. One son immigrated to Korea with her. Her other son and daughter live in China with her three grandchildren. She arrived in Tokyo with hopes of visiting a nephew, who is a high official in a Tokyo-based organization for Koreans in Japan. He refused to see her, saying that he could not afford for anyone to know that his aunt is a former comfort woman. She seemed more devastated by this than by anything else she talked about.

Kang knows her own deep need for justice. "I need an apology from the emperor. Without it, I will never be able to forget or forgive. Nothing else will come close to satisfying that desire. The despair I feel, the anger, and all the suffering that I had to endure. Nothing will fill that need."

She quickly adds, however, that her mission is more than a personal one. "I really ask American people to be educated and understand that this did really happen. I'm living and the Japanese government denies us. When I'm gone, I know there will be nothing there that will force them to admit that it ever happened. That makes me angry. People should know."

Korean Quarterly thanks translator Kyung Park for her help in this interview, and for her gentle medical care and compassion for Kang Halmoni and the other halmonis during the conference. ●